

The new fundamental feeling: our conclusive transitoriness.
—**Friedrich Nietzsche** (*The Dawn*)



Introduction to Natural Selection

The world around us is full of organized, intricate complexity and appears to have been designed; on this point both Naturalists¹ and Christians agree. Both groups further agree that to have an *actual* design, you would need an *actual* designer. Ultimately, the point of contention is whether this world of complexity has *actually* been designed or whether it merely *appears* to have been designed. Naturalists claim that Charles Darwin’s principle of natural selection explains—in the case of organisms anyway—how you can have apparent design without an actual designer. To be fair, the explanation is relatively straight-forward: minuscule genetic variations compounded over very long spans of time among creatures who value the prospect of survival more than the prospect of being eaten by a predator accounts for the present appearance of design in nature. Natural selection explains how you can have “design” without the necessity of a designer, thus rendering the designer superfluous and, according to most Naturalists, counter-productive to true knowledge. In this way, a Naturalist can still speak of “designs” in nature with relative consistency. We see this theme in the influential American philosopher, Daniel Dennett:

1 By “Naturalists,” I mean those who endorse Naturalism and, by Naturalism, I mean atheistic metaphysical Darwinian Naturalism, the philosophical view that the natural world is all that exists. To simplify things a bit, Naturalism can simply be thought of as atheistic Darwinism.

We know that in the early days—the first few billion years—of life on this planet, self-protective designs emerged, thanks to the slow and non-miraculous process of natural selection. ... Along the way there was much *avoidance* and *prevention*, but at a pace much too slow to appreciate unless we artificially speed it up in imagination. ... Eventually, though, the good designs emerge victorious—or the lineage perishes, which is the much more likely outcome of all these “efforts” at self-preservation of lineage. A few lucky lineages *happened* to “find” good countermoves. (They weren’t doing anything, they were just part of what was *happening*—the lucky part, as it happens, that happened to be born with useful mutations). These lucky ones had descendants whose descendants—the lucky ones, again—had descendants, and so forth, till you get to us. We—lucky us—are made of such useful parts, exquisitely designed to be good at contributing to avoidance, but now on a much swifter timescale.²

We might say that, with respect to complex organisms, Naturalists believe in *quasi-design*.³ Dennett, for example, certainly does not believe that organisms have been designed in the sense that, say, Thomas Edison designed the light bulb or Dr. Emmett Brown designed the flux capacitor,⁴ for in each of those cases there was a great deal of forethought on the part of some mastermind. Rather, Dennett believes that intelligent creatures fighting for food and survival are very occasionally born with some random genetic variation that just happens to be slightly useful. Those members of the species who happen to be born with this slightly-useful feature naturally have a slight edge over those members lacking this modest upgrade, and if you compound this very slow process over very long spans of time, then you

2 Daniel C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 52.

3 The English prefix “quasi” is derived, without much novelty, from the Latin *quasi*, meaning “as if” or “almost.”

4 Which is, of course, a fictional time-travel device featured in the *Back to the Future* film series.

can, in fact, imagine “designs” emerging, designs, as it were, in retrospect and hindsight. According to Dennett, “natural selection would inevitably produce *adaptation* ... and under the right circumstances, [Darwin] argued, accumulated adaptation would create speciation.”⁵

Similarly, if we compare an amoeba and a man from the perspective of Naturalism, seeing the latter as the long-term product of some of the efforts of the former, it is patently true that natural selection tends toward greater complexity and survivability over time. Random mutations appear, and then the fight for survival naturally weeds out the “bad designs” over time. So long as we keep in mind that natural selection has no teleological⁶ leanings—no purposes, plans, or goals—it is true that natural selection has made progress. It did not intend to make progress, of course, it is not in any way aimed at making progress, but, from the perspective of man⁷ looking back in time in the mind’s eye, evolutionary progress is an obvious fact for the Naturalist. Along these lines, Darwin can speak of “new and improved” species arising over time, as the new designs supersede the old designs:

The extinction of species and of whole groups of species which has played so conspicuous a part in the history of the organic world, almost inevitably follows from the principle of natural selection; for old forms are supplanted by new and improved forms.⁸

Though Naturalists commonly characterize these useful genetic variations as “random,” this does not—contrary to many Christian caricatures—actually commit Naturalists to the notion that natural selection

5 Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 43.

6 Teleology is the theory or study of purpose in nature. Teleology refers to objective purposes, goals, or ends. The question “what is the meaning of life?” is an inherently teleological question, since it supposes that life has some objective purpose or utility.

7 The use of the male pronouns and of “man”, “mankind” and such throughout the work are intended to encompass women, of course, as it is certainly not my intention to try to exclude anyone. I simply found this usage to be less distracting within the context of this particular work.

8 Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (Chicago: Great Books of the Western World, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. 1993), 237.

is a random or arbitrary process, for Naturalists believe natural selection is a scientific and mechanical process which operates in accordance with the determinate laws of nature. Just as when Naturalists say “design” they really mean something like “quasi-design,” so too when they say “random” they really mean something like “quasi-

random.” As the evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins, explains, “The Darwinian says that variation is random in the sense that it is not directed towards improvement, and that the tendency towards improvement in evolution comes from selection.”⁹ So it’s not that the variations are actually “random” in some literal, substantive sense, and certainly not in any mystical sense, but the point rather is that the process is non-intentional, unguided, not directed toward any particular end. The basic idea is that, sometimes, stuff just happens. Approximately one in 500 humans is born with six fingers on one hand. The extra digit is pretty much always a useless and unwanted freeloader, but it’s not particularly difficult to imagine someone—someday—getting one that actually serves some practical function. At a minimum, we can say that there’s certainly nothing logically impossible about it. The Naturalist’s claim is that mutations emerge in the genetic code, and the only reason the “good designs” happen to stick around over the long term is because they work well in practice and contribute to the survival of those who just happen to be born with them.

Thus we discover that Naturalism excludes any form of teleology within nature. There is no mind behind nature at all, and certainly therefore, no mastermind. It is the stuff of myth, from this perspective, to suppose that you were *meant* to be here, or that there is some teleological *reason* for your

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⁹ Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 438.

being *here* or your *being* in general. Though it may have a nice ring to it, it's not at all true, from this perspective, that "everything happens for a reason." We are the current product (the latest model, you might say) of a very long series of random mutations in a very long struggle for survival, and there is no guarantee whatsoever that our luck will continue to hold out. From the Naturalist's point of view, there is nothing at all *necessary* about the current state of affairs; this is merely how the dice of random genetic variation happened to fall. "If we were to [wind the tape back] and play it again and again, the likelihood is infinitesimal of *Us* being the product of any other run through the evolutionary mill."¹⁰ The only certainty within the framework of Naturalism seems to be *unpredictable evolutionary change*.

We have thus hopefully dispelled one or two common misunderstandings about Naturalism and evaded one or two of the most common strawman arguments that Christian authors sometimes construct. Though it is easy enough to contrast the simple amoeba and the sophisticated human and to caricature the Naturalist as making the gigantic leap between them all in an instant, and then attributing the great deed to the omnipotent power of randomness, this is, in truth, not a particularly fair presentation. To understand a system, you must understand it upon its own terms, and if we Christians are—in a post-Christian culture—to make a compelling case that Christianity is still a viable worldview, worthy of a person's trust and assent, we must make every effort to present our opponents' views fairly, in their clearest and highest expressions.

Naturalism has had a monolithic ascent in the past century-and-a-half and now stands, among worldviews, as an indomitable skyscraper. It has become the orthodoxy of the academic community and the Saturday morning cartoon alike, and there can be no doubt whatsoever that the current result is a rapid and seismic shift in the average person's outlook toward every aspect of life. Even though most folks still cling to some bland and indistinct notion of God—some inoffensive, unobtrusive, all-inclusive, have-it-your-way McDeity—it must be admitted that this really does look a great deal like

¹⁰ Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, 56.

some sort of opiate of the masses. In most cases, God is invoked simply as an afterthought unto the appearance of persistent meaning, as the proper accessory of the unexamined life. In all such cases, it must be conceded that theism very much resembles the Naturalist portrayal of it—the crutch of those who have not yet come to grips with the notion that their existence has a certain and unambiguous point of termination. As it continues to ascend, Naturalism will inevitably erode away all such rootless spiritual leanings.

The old foundation is slipping away with little resistance and Christian authors have commonly seemed content to mistake symptoms for causes and to let gimmicks stand in the place of argumentation. Every now and again it has seemed as if our overall strategy was to bring down the skyscraper with a marshmallow shooter. From a Christian perspective, the outlook can thus appear bleak on all sides, in light of which, I thought it best to try to approach the subject from a slightly different angle. Given that the marshmallow shooter has not always worked very well from the outside of the skyscraper, my plan is to sneak it inside. What follows is, in essence, a critique of Naturalism upon its own terms, a Naturalistic critique of Naturalism, or, if you like, an evolutionary critique of atheistic evolution, and in those moments where Naturalism seems distracted by the hail of cushy white confections, we will repeatedly examine the Christian alternative.

The Naturalist and the Christian can further agree that everything is at stake in such a debate.